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MONOGRAPH

ON

IVORY CARVING

IN

BURMA

BY

H. S. PRATT, I.C.S.

RANGOON:

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1901.

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MONOGRAPH ON IVORY CARVING IN BURMA.

Historical.

THE origin of the ivory carving industry in Burma is wrapped in obscurity. The ivory carvers of that town assert that Moulmein was the first town in Burma in which carving in ivory was practised, and one of them,* who still plies his craft, claims to have been the first exponent of the art. He commenced working in ivory about 30 years ago at the request of some Shan timber traders from Kado, who were desirous of having images of Buddha carved from tusks in their possession.

Although he professes to have been self-taught, it is improbable that he evolved the art entirely from his own brain without any models to guide him.

The descendants of a well-known rival† of his who died some years ago, trace their craft back to their uncle, which would tend to show that ivory carving has been practised in Moulmein for a longer period than thirty years. At Pyinmana ivory carving, though in a cruder form than in Moulmein, is known to have been practised before the annexation.

It is related in the Buddhist legends how in one of his existences Gautama Buddha took the form of an elephant and was known as Sattan Sin Min. His consort, Sula Batta, being under the impression that she was slighted by her lord, prayed that in her next existence she might have vengeance upon him. In course of time she passed into another existence and became Chief Queen of the King of Benares. To heal her of an illness, which she feigned, she caused it to be declared imperative that she should wear an ivory earring. A celebrated hunter, Thawnuttaya, was accordingly despatched and succeeded in obtaining the tusks of Sattan. From that time forth working in ivory came into vogue.

Another legend narrates that in 470 B.E. Along Cithu, King of Pagan, on his return from a journey to Ceylon and various parts of India, saw a huge white object near the sea-shore. On approaching he perceived it to be a mound of ivory, which a gigantic centipede had erected for its residence.

Such was the size and strength of the monster that it was in the habit of catching and devouring elephants, the tusks of which it used to form a wall around its place of abode.

Taking advantage of the opportunity when the centipede was away in search of food, the king carried off the tusks and had them carved into images to add to the attractions of his palace.

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* Saya Ko Shwe Ko. | † Saya Nyein.

The legitimate inference from these traditions would seem to be that the Burmese have long been familiar with working in ivory and that it was introduced from India.

Present conditions of the industry.

So far as can be ascertained, the only towns in which ivory carving is now practised are Moulmein and Pyinmana.

The art formerly had a footing in Rangoon, but the only remaining carver known has ceased to exercise his profession and, when an order is placed with him, engages a workman from Moulmein.

It is supposed that most of the other carvers have left Rangoon for Moulmein, where the occupation is more remunerative, or have adopted other professions.

At Pyinmana, though ivory is procured without difficulty, owing to the large number of elephants in the neighbourhood, it is reported that there is only one ivory carver worthy of the name. The industry there is stationery and is said to have been in the same condition before the annexation. Some of the work is fairly good, but is not to be compared with that done in Moulmein.

The latter town may therefore be said to be the centre of the ivory carving industry in Burma, and even there it is not practised on a large scale, three families only being engaged in the art.

The industry has been aptly compared to our English cottage industries, affording a pleasant livelihood and giving a sufficient income without unduly hard work.

The craft is handed down from father to son and reminds one somewhat of the conditions that prevailed in mediæval times.

The craftsmen and apprentices are grouped round a master, under whom they work and who gives his name to their productions.

The art is rigidly confined to these groups, and every precaution is taken to prevent outsiders gaining a knowledge of the craft and adopting it as a profession.

Given the requisite natural aptitude, an ivory carver can be trained in three years.

Prospects of development.

There are no signs of any immediate expansion of the industry, and those engaged therein say that little or no carving is done as compared with ten or fifteen years ago.

This statement is, however, in all probability an intentional exaggeration. The ivory carvers are very jealous of their profession and reluctant to give any details as to the method of working or the income obtained therefrom.

Within certain limits the profits derived appear to rest almost entirely with the artist himself. It is believed that the ordinary income of a master-carver in Moulmein is about Rs. 600 a year, but there is little doubt that he could considerably increase his earnings if he were so disposed.

It is not, however, the way of the Burman to over-exert himself so long as he has sufficient to meet his needs, which are not great, and a slight surplus to devote to objects connected with his religion.

Although the ivory carvers themselves say the demand for their work has fallen off in recent years, the report received from Moulmein shows that there has been a slight increase in the number of persons employed in the industry.

All the carvers have as much work as they can do, in fact, almost more, and take a long time to execute orders, pleading press of work as an excuse for delay. There is thought to be ample scope for a considerable number of carvers in addition to those already employed.

It is suggested that the opening of a school of art might give an impetus to the industry.

Influence of imported articles.

The proportions of the industry are so insignificant that it is not touched by foreign competition.

Articles are not manufactured in anticipation of the demand, but solely to meet orders received.

The only way in which imported articles exercise an influence is when purchasers order articles to be made according to western models.

Source of materials.

At Pyinmana elephants are plentiful and there is no difficulty in obtaining as much ivory as is required. In Rangoon the small quantity required is procured usually through the agency of the ubiquitous Chinaman at a price varying from Rs. 17 to Rs. 22 per viss.

In Moulmein the ivory is procured chiefly from Shan traders and occasionally from the local timber mills, or the Commissariat Department when an elephant happens to die or break its tusks.

The cost there is about Rs. 17 a viss for small tusks, but is higher proportionately for large specimens. The price is said to have risen considerably in recent years.

The total amount of ivory used in a year by the Moulmein ivory carvers may be estimated approximately at from eight to twelve pairs of tusks.

Method of working.

The carver himself designs and draws his patterns, which are usually of the conventional Burmese type, unless copied from European models by the direction of the purchaser.

Family patterns are preserved and handed down.

The following account of the processes employed is based on the description given by an *ex*-ivory carver * resident in Rangoon.

The tusk is first cut to the required shape and size with a *da*, saw, or axe, as the case may be, and then smoothed by the application of a file.

This done the required design is sketched in pencil on the surface of the ivory. Holes are next made with a small gauge, which is hammered with a deer's antler when necessary.

Particular stress is laid on the point that only deer's antlers are used. Iron and wooden hammers or mallets are respectively too heavy and too light. If a wooden mallet is used in carving, being soft and light, it will not have the desired effect on the ivory.

Iron hammers, on the other hand, being hard and heavy, there is great danger of the work being spoiled if they are used.

When the requisite number of holes has been made the ivory is rough-carved according to the designs already sketched.

The tools used in this operation are gauges, flat chisels, files and drills of different sizes.

The next process is smooth carving. This requires great care and delicacy of touch.

The instruments generally used are small chisels, files, drills and gauges. No mallet or hammer is used except when absolutely necessary. After the carving of the outter frame-work has thus been completed, the figure inside the casing (assuming that this style of work is chosen) is carved in the same way. When the whole carying has been completed to the satisfaction of the artist, and the finishing touches added, it is smoothed by the application of fine sand-paper. It is then given a polish by being rubbed with paddy-husk washed with soap, and finally dried in the sun.

This account conveys a very inadequate impression of the patience, skill, and delicacy of touch required to achieve the results attained by the artist.

It is almost impos ible to convey in words any idea of the way in which, with his small iron instruments, flattened and sharpened at the end, somewhat after the fashion of a miniature screw-driver, the carver chisels out the interior of a block of ivory into a figure, which is most faithfully and accurately portrayed to the smallest detail, and

* Saya Po Thit.

yet at the same time leaves it surrounded by a frame of open work, or causes it to join and blend with the encasing frame-work, and so combines the two with the most happy result, or again leaves an opening in the enclosing frame and discloses a sitting image of Buddha in a miniature shrine.

The work must be seen to appreciate it fully.

Owing to the fragile nature of the materials used and the extreme care and delicate handling required, the apprentice is not allowed to use ivory for his first attempts. Till he has attained a certain degree of skill the master gives him to practise with a cocoanut shell, which is more brittle than ivory, and therefore demands even more careful handling. When the master thinks that his pupil has attained sufficient proficiency, then only is he allowed to experiment with ivory.

Tools.

The instruments used are very simple and consist of *das*, saws, files, drills, chisels, clamps and an axe for rough shaping large articles. Most of these are locally made and those which are not made locally are purchased in the bazaar.

The carver has a rule makes his own clamps. The smaller chisels are said to be pieces of umbrella ribs sharpened on a stone.

The photograph* of ivory carvers at work gives a good idea of the method of carving and of the tools in use.

Articles manufactured.

The chief articles made are handles for *das*, knives and forks, and paper knives.

From big tusks boxes, picture-frames, and similar articles are carved.

Chess-men, mats, chairs, &c., are also made to order.

For Buddhist purchasers images of Gautama Buddha are carved.

In Rangoon carved tripods for supporting bowls seem most popular. Illustrations* of these are given. Whole tusks are frequently covered with carving for use as ornaments.

An unusually fine pair is shown in an illustration.*

Another pair, of which unfortunately no photograph could be procured, was decorated with no less than 28 statues of Gautama and gave employment to an experienced artist for between seven and ten months.

The artistic side.

The style of the carving is that generally known as Burmese. The figures are treated conventionally as in wood carving and silver

* Not reproduced.

work. Even where articles are made after European patterns, they are still executed in the conventional Burmese style.

The scroll work and flowers do not call for special remark. Attention has already been drawn to the great skill displayed in carving the inner design, surrounded as it is by a casing of delicate tracery.

This is a favourite device ; the figure within being quite distinct, although carved from the same block as the outer envelope. Unfortunately this is but imperfectly reproduced in a photograph, and it is only by inspection of actual specimens of carving that the nature of the design can be fully realized.

In the absence of other ivory work there are no materials for instituting a comparison, and it is difficult to accurately weigh the merits of Burmese ivory carving from the artistic point of view.

The finish is possibly not so good as in Chinese and European carving, and the polish is probably less fine.

There is a lack of originality in design, and little art in the creative sense is exhibited.

If, however, art consists in accurate and successful imitation, then in this sense it is displayed in a high degree.

It is in the skill and ability exhibited in the execution of the work in spite of the comparatively simple instruments at the disposal of the artist, that the chief merit of Burmese ivory carving is undoubtedly to be found.

Although originality and creative genius may not be conspicuous by their presence, the delicacy of touch, the close co-operation of hand and eye, the elaboration of detail, and the fidelity with which the design is reproduced, all contribute their share to the general artistic effect, and it is here especially that scope is given for the development of individual talent.

SALIN: } H. S. PRATT.
The 9th August 1900. }

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